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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HILLAH 000082

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [KDEM](#) [IZ](#) [IR](#)  
SUBJECT: GOVERNOR FEELS THE HEAT, AS DOES INDEPENDENT JOURNALIST

REF: HILLAH 0048

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Al-Hillah, Department of State.  
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: After a local newspaper printed a story claiming that virtually all Babil residents want Governor Salem Saleh Mehdi Al-Muslimawi to step down, the governor pushed back on the airwaves and the pages of his own paper to attempt to discredit his accusers. A few days thereafter he traveled to Iran, leading to speculation that he was fleeing pressure as he apparently did in March (reftel). Since his return to Al-Hillah he has stated his belief, which PRT refuted, that the U.S. is backing those who want to remove him. Meantime the publisher of the paper that published the initial story has received an intimidating e-mail that has seemingly had the intended effect. End summary.

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JUICY STORY  
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¶2. (SBU) Babil province's weekly independent newspaper, Al-Fayha', led with a sensational item in its May 16 issue. Describing the visit of a delegation of 32 citizens to a Provincial Council (PC) meeting earlier in the month, the article said that the group had called on the PC to live up to its responsibilities by removing the current governor for incompetence. The basis of their demand was a survey the group presented allegedly showing that 98 percent of respondents want the governor replaced, 99 percent want his successor to be a political independent, and 80 percent want the next governor to have at least a bachelor's degree. The paper did not print the survey itself and PRT has not seen a copy of it.

¶3. (SBU) The headline said that the delegation gave the council two weeks to take the "appropriate decision," warning that the public expected a decision and "would not wait long." One of the governor's allies, PC Projects Committee chair Eng. Abdel Razzaq Al-Nasrawi, sprang to the governor's defense. Abdel Razzaq told the article's author that the group's claims merely repeated accusations from anonymous fliers that had appeared in Al-Hillah in March (cited reftel) and that the hard-working governor had parried all the allegations at that time in an appearance before the council.

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SHARP RIPOSTE  
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¶4. (SBU) The governor himself fired back two days later on

Al-Furatain radio and then on May 22 in his weekly print mouthpiece, Al-Wasat. (Note: The paper took on a different appearance in this issue, with a new front-page layout and more color printing. End note.) Slamming the delegation that visited the PC as "not representative of the people of Babil," the governor went on to attack the survey's "illogical" methodology, which he claimed was carried out by a "biased" party based on a sample size of only 100 people rather than the 900 Al-Fayhaa cited. He also strongly criticized those seeking to take down "national personalities" based on "self-interest." His other line of attack was to crow about expected improvements in services, especially electricity. The governor recounted that he had phoned the Minister of Electricity and obtained a promise that Babil would soon get its full share (128 megawatts) of power - enough, he said, for twelve hours of current a day.

15. (SBU) Eng. Abdel Razzaq chimed in for this article as well, seconding the contention that the survey was flawed and not credible. Speaking to the widely held view that the governor lacks the requisite academic degree to hold office, Abdel Razzaq said that "everyone knows" that the governor is a graduate of the World Center for the Study of Islamic Systems (NFI), giving him the equivalent of a diploma of one year of post-preparatory ("ba'd al-'idadiya" in Arabic) study. Besides, said Abdel Razzaq, the governor is not only the head of the Iraqi Supreme Islamic Council (ISIC, formerly SCIRI) in Babil but also comes from a family that has "given many martyrs for Iraq's liberation" and has deep roots in the Middle Euphrates area.

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QUICK TRIP EAST  
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16. (C) At about this time the governor began complaining again of health problems. Based on his having left the province for two weeks in March to treat the suspiciously sudden onset of heart trouble at a time when political pressures on him were building, PRT anticipated that the governor might again absent himself. (Note: ISIC leader Abdel Aziz Al-Hakim happened to

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have traveled to the U.S. for medical tests a few days earlier. End note.) Indeed Governor Salem did go to Iran, though only for a few days, on or about May 25. The reported reason for the trip was an economic conference, though it is likely that he also went to call on his patron Al-Hakim, who by that time had flown to Tehran. The governor missed a scheduled meeting with PRT leader on May 28 but was in Najaf the next day to join other south-central governors for a meeting with Muqtada Al-Sadr.

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MENACING E-MAIL  
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17. (C) Ali Al-Rubaie, the editor-in-chief of the newspaper that had published the initial story about the citizens' delegation and the survey, contacted the Regional Embassy Office on May 30 in dread after receiving a threatening e-mail from someone signing himself "Nasre Gehad." The message accused him of going too far and becoming "the foreigners' stooge." Saying that God is patient but not endlessly forbearing, the writer warned that righteous punishment would befall Al-Rubaie and others like him to make them examples. The message closed with a modified citation of a Quranic verse (50:16) telling him that he was being watched closely: "We are closer to you than your jugular vein." Al-Rubaie, a regular contact and International Visitor program alumnus, told PRT that he plans to lie low for a time.

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COMMENT  
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18. (C) The governor clearly feels under continued pressure if not outright threat; a source within his security apparatus has told us that Governor Salem even believes the U.S. wants to kill him. The governor took PRT leader aside at a meeting on May 30

to ask privately why we are "standing with those who are accusing me." PRT leader assured him that we are not taking sides in the province's internal political struggles, that we regard him as the legitimately elected governor and are interested only in seeing the rule of law respected and the people's interests served.

19. (C) Comment, continued: The threat against Ali Al-Rubaie is disturbing but unfortunately not uncommon in Iraq. He does not recognize the address from which the message was sent, and the writer could well be using a pseudonym. The timing - the e-mail having arrived the same morning when the governor divulged his apparent belief in a broad conspiracy against him - may be entirely coincidental, but as with much else here, that remains to be seen. End comment.

HUNTER